

Rethinking Democracy, Rethinking State: a Conversation with Zygmunt Bauman

Repensando la democracia, repensando el Estado: una conversación con Zygmunt Bauman

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Zygmunt Bauman, professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds and, since 1990, emeritus professor, has developed key concepts for the understanding of fundamental issues of today's world, such as liquid modernity, time, space and disorder, individualism versus community, globalization and consumer's culture, love and identity, etc. His analyses of the links between modernity, Holocaust, democracy and social politics were the principal subject of the following interview, which was conducted by Vicente Ordóñez and Vicent Sanz on the occasion of Zygmunt Bauman's recent visit to Spain.



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Recerca: Mr Bauman, we would like to begin with some reflections about the relationship between Sociology and History. The structures and social dynamics analysis' is a link shared by Sociology and History. Many pages have been written about this particular issue, but the interdisciplinary dialog is far to be fluid. In what measure the interdisciplinary dialog is necessary for the comprehension of the present or past societies?

Zygmunt Bauman: I have a slightness sceptical approach with the question of so-called interdisciplinary relations. I believe that the division of knowledge, particularly Human Society and Humanities, is an artificial product of universal administration. You need departments, because you need to have the address where you send an application for a grant or money, for research and so on. So obviously, integrally, unified, human world split into parts, which don't have direct relation to the aspects of human existence. It might be Sociology is about human condition changing over time and space. So, because this sort of integrating inclinations of the speech, the historians work on different kind of sources. I think academic structure, in general, is one of the few relics of feudal system. Nevertheless, the human beings who are the objects of your study, of my study, of everyone in Humanities' study, they don't live in History or in Sociology or in Political Science or in Economics. It is not like that: the question is that we are competing for the same territory, in fact. You want to understand, I want to understand: we use different tools, different approaches, but that's actually irrelevant. Therefore, the cooperation is absolutely inevitable, and is capable. Just to give you one example: when I started to work on the book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, I was not interested in learning something new about the



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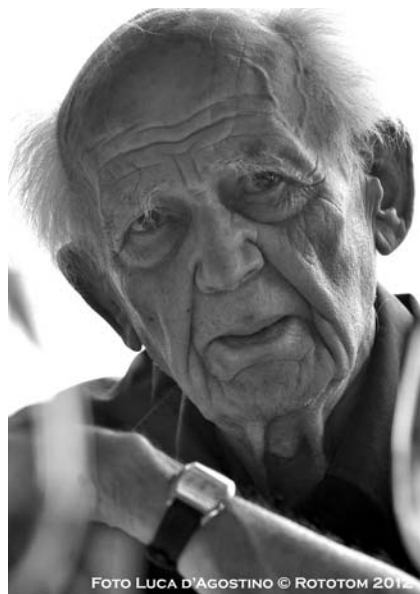
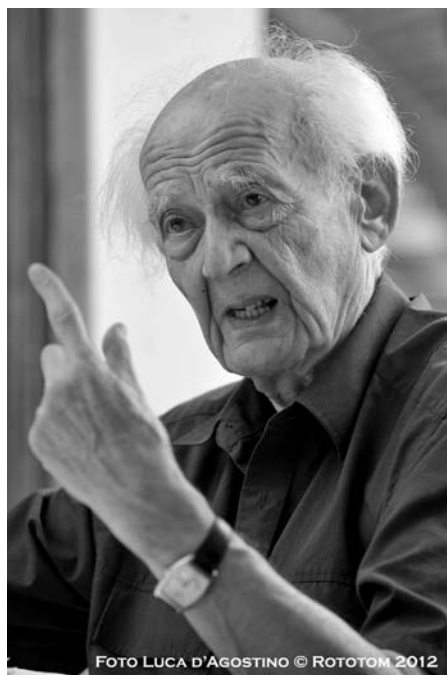


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Holocaust, because that has been already done by historians. I was trying to find out what sociologists have to say about the connection between modern life conditions and the possibilities of evaluating Holocaust and genocide in modern terms. What I found out is that what I could read in sociological works about the Holocaust told me more about the state of Sociology than about the history of the Holocaust. Holocaust was treated in Sociology as an unfortunate accident on the road to progress, and I thought that historical perspective was not strictly necessary to understand the sociological problem, because “modernity” and the “Holocaust” is a sociological problem. But in order to understand it you have to use the material collected mostly by historians. Just one example: interdisciplinarity is not a particular, artificial, special, unusual, abnormal, achievement of representing one or another stabilised discipline at the University. I think it is the return from the artificiality to normality.

Recerca: But is not easy to fight with this administrative division...

Zygmunt Bauman: I can afford that because I'm a very old man. I'm twenty years after retirement. I can say things without looking what the reactions inside the academia would be. Until you are retired, you are confined, you are constraint by the rules of the academia; you have to observe the boundaries, you cannot trespass over somebody else's territory. I'm free to move according to my consideration, my wishes. But I really do believe that we are in the same business, grazing at the same meadow, and the meadow is called “human condition”, which is changing, constantly changing in time and space as well. Differentiated, if you look at the globe, at the planet today. Changing on a different pace, with local differences in the way in



which it is developing today in Brazil, for example, and in the United Kingdom. So it is spatial differentiation together, of course, with the historical development.

Historical perspective is terribly important for sociologists, I believe. If you want one example again: Ignacio Ramonet wants to understand what is happening to the world today, and I've tried to solve the same problem. But he is not a historian, and I'm not a historian. Anyway, without history you cannot understand what is going on at the moment. In order to understand this, you must go back to a crucial date in the history of the world, particularly Europe, but through Europe, the rest of the world as well. The year I have in mind is 1648. In fact, you have to go back even to 1555 when in Augsburg the dynasties, fighting each other in the religious wars, wanted to achieve some *modus vivendi*: an ability to live together in peace. And they coined the concept *cuius regio eius religio*. But I've mentioned 1648 because it took almost one hundred years more for this principle to be actualized into a document. Indeed, two documents: one in Osnabrück and the other in Münster, the so-called Westphalian Agreement. The formula *cuius regio eius religio* means that the ruler has the right to tell which god you should believe in: if I rule you, I have the right to decide what god to select. Once you have this formula, you have the foundation of the modern concept of sovereignty: that each ruler is free from external interference within a territory. We have an inheritance of Westphalian Agreement and still live under its pressure. That simply means that it is an Unholy Trinity of the Political State, Territory and Nation what called is nation-state. I think it was developed



within the already existing historical in-created formula: if you take the formula *cuius regio eius religio* and put “nation” instead of “religio”, you have the key to the contemporary organization of the planet.

Recerca: The interconnection of the events and the dynamics in the era of globalization has arisen as issues in more than one occasion. How do we incorporate this transnational perspective into the social analysis?

Zygmunt Bauman: Let's see. We have globalization. Therefore, the essential issue it was inherited by us remember the Westphalian Agreement. Maybe the idea of territorial sovereignty has lost most of its meaning, but it has a tremendous impact on what is happening inside the country. I think every government acts under a double bind. On the one hand, there is political fiction of sovereignty: a government is elected by the electorate living in all the territory of the state; on the other hand, however, there are multinational banks: financiers are travelling, as Manuel Castells points out in its *Space of flows*, beyond the reach of the local sovereignty. They are specializing, very much like international terrorism, international drug traffic, international weapon trade and all these other things. They are specializing in ignoring the local customs, ignoring the local boundaries, moving free here and there. So, we have power: it is already free from political control. And we have politics, which is suffering daily from the deficit of power. That's our condition now. You cannot find a good way out, really. On the one hand, whoever happens to be a prime minister

temporarily in Spain, or in Greece, or in Italy, must look to order the electorate, because in three years there will be another election. I've heard that Spaniards want to occupy the Parliament and they want a quicker election even, faster than three years. So you must look to order. But in the other hand he is not free to follow his own ways, follow his initiatives. If he does, then obviously even more financials run away from Spain. And it would be high day or festival for currency speculators if that happens if he abandons the impulse from outside, policy of austerity, and goes for growth rather than austerity.

We live out of the border of the inherited arrangement. Everything that has happened between 1648 and 2012 was in the shadow of this concept: politics is a local affaire, and until the middle of the twentieth century it was close to truth, because power and politics were united in the framework of the nation-state. But this is no longer the fact. Nevertheless, our politics have not caught up with the development of power: power is globalized, politics still local. And if you look at this historical period, step by step mind you the United Nations, which is the closest of the idea of global government, at some sort, it was created with one instruction: to defend, tooth-and-nail, the national sovereignty of every state. The people who created the Charter of the United Nations were under the impression of the Second World War. And started from aggression: aggression means violating the territorial sovereignty of another state. So, they thought that the future of humanity, peaceful future, would be secure if the impossibility, the sanctity of the state boundaries are preserved. But they cannot be preserved because they have been already subbed by globalization. I don't know what the solution is today, really. I think that we are in a situation which is not a slight reform here and there (which is necessary), but rethinking from scratch, obviously, the historical created condition of our living today. That's my answer.

Recerca: This is an arduous task that implies, also, a revision of democracy. Is it time to rethink democracy, Mr Bauman?

Zygmunt Bauman: Well, the question is: in a globalized world you cannot have democracy in one super country. Can we have democracy in its present shape? Democracy is already a fiction because the idea of democracy was based on the idea of national sovereignty. Democracy was inscribed into the national frame, right? But there is no such thing as national sovereignty. They are already pitted in a double bind in two contradictory pressures, under which every double element is smarting. So the hands of governments are tied. In the idea of a democratic country they move the election the electorate instructs the government what to do and the government follows the instruction. This logic has been broken. Apparently we are still thinking in the old terms: we speak about the recent election in Spain as the turn from the left to the right; we think of the last election in France as the turn from the right to the left. Nothing of this has happened! There are no trends of this at all. I think the

changes in political governments are directed today not by the changing sentimental ideologies of the population, but by the dynamics of frustration. If there had been a right wing government in Spain before the credit collapse, I'm quite sure that there would be a movement from right to left. If Hollande had been the president before the latest election in France, I'm sure that Sarkozy would have become the president. People are reacting to frustration. Each government is coming to power today because of this double bind. They say that they will defend the interests of the country. But they are not able to do it, because there are pressures which are completely unconcerned, completely uninterested, and completely indifferent to the wishes and preferences of Spaniards or Frenchmen or Germans or whoever, right? They have to manoeuvre between two pressures, which cannot be reconciled. I don't think that there is a little line, a line of compromise between these two pressures. And let me be sorry for this very pessimistic picture. But I believe that this is not a question of occupying Parliament here and there: it is a question of raising our politics to the level achieved by power. What was the secret of the relatively successful period of nation-state building? Power and politics were at the same level; they were operating at the same level. For example, nineteenth century in France was a period that started from what Max Weber described as a separation of business and household, which meant separation of business from the local control, because a household was involved in local community, in craftsmen, deals and things like that, and they were the only real powers: local powers. What happened at the beginning of the twentieth century? Business emancipated from these constraints, created a new territory, a sort of a Wild West we all know Hollywood films where the stronger wins and the weaker is defeated. The whole nineteenth century is the history of the emerging modern state trying to colonize this Wild West by imposing to some level on it. It was successful. There were a series of factory bills: legalizing the means of working-class' self-defence, allowing trade unions, strikes, and so on. In the end, there was some sort of a temporary settlement at the beginning of the twentieth century, which is simplified by the Ford Factory. The Ford Factory was this sort of a tooth between two sides. Why? Because of the accompaniment of power and politics within the framework of the same territory it was the territory of the nation-state. Both sides of the company, bosses and their employees, were painfully aware that they were going to meet again, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the year after, and ten years after. That is the situation: there are two bounds fixed to each other, bounds that remain together. They have to sit around the table, like we are sitting, and elaborate some *modus vivendi*. For example: to delineate the limit to which the inequality overage and profits can go read: some *modus coexistendi*. That has actually happened—as long as this mutual dependency was a mutual dependency. But the mutuality has been unilaterally broken because of the power globalizing and politics remaining lonesome. So the dependency is no longer mutual. The rival is tied to the ground. It cannot travel freely like

you and me, because the emigrants will be stopped at the next border, sent home back and so on. But the bosses if you go on strike, for example they have a very simple solution: they just pack up their belongings and send their finances to another country, another country in which people are prepared to work for a dollar a day. They are more docile, they don't have trade unions, and they don't have all this high flown ambitions. And you are doomed. What is left? Let's think of Western Europe: Western Europe is now a graveyard of the past, big industries sentenced. They went elsewhere, they vanished from the ground, but all sides are painfully aware that they are doomed to each other—they missed each other forever. They are painfully aware now that their relationship is very frail, very brittle, and could be revoked at any moment without any notice. And that's what I called *liquid modernity*.

Recerca: So, right now the relationship between power and politics is unbalanced?

Zygmunt Bauman: The problem that politics is facing is, first, to raise politics to the level achieved already by powers in order to subordinate powers again to political control. And second, to develop instruments of political action, which are equivalent to the instruments developed again I go to History by our grandfathers or great-grandfathers, for the service of the nation-state. They developed representative democracy, the ideal of the universal electoral alike, the political rights and so on, public opinion promotion... they developed media, which is able to condensate the different ideas, the different preferences and so on. It all works; it works at the level of the nation-state. We need something like that, equivalent of that, but at a global level. Actually, we haven't started doing anything seriously; we have no idea how could it look like. One thing I'm sure of is that it will not be the national Parliament on main, big earn, that will follow this pattern. It will look different, it will be a different form of democracy in the same way as twentieth century democracy, modern democracy, is still democracy, but absolutely dissimilar to what Aristotle thought of democracy when he wrote about it. He thought about people coming to the agora, and to the market place, quarrelling directly, selecting their committees, or removing people from their committees if they were dissatisfied. The mere idea of indirect representative democracy was virtually non-existent still in the eighteenth century it was created after the French Revolution. It is a novel idea, but it was developed with this idea of the nation-state in mind, within the resources available at the level of nationality. These resources are not available at a global level. But so far there is a person who suggested how that could be done at a planetary level: Jürgen Habermas, as you know, and his idea of the constitution of public. The idea is that the feeling of ethnicity or common history or belonging to the same past and having the same destiny, the same future, is not a universally necessary condition of social integration. Social entities were integrated by this principle, in the historical period, from the beginning of modern times until now. But it is not necessary to continue with it. One

can replace this emotional attachment to the *ethnos*, which is an emotional attachment to the common law, in the sense of the interest of constitutional project. Whether it can be done or not I have no idea. What I am concerned, however, is this: whatever is called integration could be achieved or not; but it needs to be based on institutions. And we don't have a single, truly global institution, so far. I don't see it. You can name them, but... I don't think the United Nations is a global institution. It is an intergovernmental institution. It is very much like... let's imagine that in Benicàssim or in Valencia or in Madrid or in Paris, there are new rules of traffic. It is said that at the red light you should stop if you side or range, but inside the municipality you have to go. Now, our global laws are like that at the moment. It is not a global law: it depends on the negotiation around the table. Alliances are made at hot. They are temporary. So the institutional crisis of global politics does not exist. And I also believe I won't see it because I am a very old man, but you all around the table will see it, I hope the twenty-first century will be spent on the attempt to raise politics to a global level. It is a matter of life or death.

Recerca: In this landscape of rupture between politics and power, you have awarded a relevant prominence to the efficiency of the state. This efficiency nowadays is questioned because of the disability to give answers to the economic and social problems. The state as we conceive it, has it remained obsolete?

Zygmunt Bauman: Well, this is the problem. We are speaking about power and politics. What is power? And what is politics? In my, very simplified, very down to earth, definition: power is the ability to have things done. And politics is the ability to decide which things ought to be done. In order to have democracy, you have to have power and politics together. But now they are not connected any more. So, that is why I've said that, on the one hand, you have power free from political control; on the other hand we have politics, which is powerless: politics cannot force the way which things ought to be done. If your Prime Minister makes decisions that currency speculators and stock-exchange don't like, probably it would be the end of Spain. So, I repeat what I have in mind: finances are globalised, investment capital is globalised it moves freely in the *space of flows* commodity trade is globalised, information is globalised, also the criminality is globalised, terrorism is globalised, drug traffic is globalised, weapon-trade, which is behind the 49% crypto-wars which are going on now at the moment, when we are sitting around the table we don't read very much about them in the newspapers, but they are very real. Now, these forces, these powers are globalised. One could ask: what is the connection between finances and international terrorism? They all agree at one point: they all undermine, ignore and neglect the idea of national territorial sovereignty. Politics tries, against all logic and against all realities, to defend this territorial sovereignty. Can it do it with the economic powers globalised? I believe that it is impossible.

Recerca: Are we experiencing here, in the Western World, something like a colonial state? And, could we learn something from the anti-colonial movements? Because, at some point, the anti-colonial movements have something in common with European social movements—anti-global movements, 15-M and so on.

Zygmunt Bauman: I'm very grateful to you that you have brought the issue of Europe. Let's think about the legacy of Westphalian settlement, a key and also a problem of the European Union. Lisbon treaty: the first reaction the practical implementation, which established some sort of a President of the European Union and some sort of a Minister of Foreign Affairs, was to elect to a point two dispositions, people who were selected on the basis of their facelessness. They were invisible. I'm travelling around Europe giving lectures and asking on every occasion: "what are their names?" Nobody could answer. They were elected on the basis that they wouldn't interfere in the traditional Westphalian set side of sovereignty. It's interesting: we have Europe, we have a united currency, which is run by seventeen sovereign Ministers of Finances. It is absurd. It is creating simply a field day for the currency speculators. They went first for Ireland, then they went for Greece, Portugal; then for Italy and Spain, and I'm quite sure that when Spain extricates itself from the crisis they will go to France. Yes, why not to France? That is part-and-parcel of the nature of capitalism. Capitalism is a parasitic institution. Parasitic in the sense that defines a host organism, it feeds on it, it bleeds it to exhaustion and then it is abandoned to go to another one. Remember history: from 1990 until today there have been a series of crisis, economic collapses. It started in Argentina Argentina had such a crisis; Malaysia had such a crisis; there was collapse of the ruble in Russia; there was an Icelandic collapse; there was Mexico; etc. It is a law of capitalism existence: there must always be a host organism. Each crisis, a successful crisis of capitalism, is all about redistribution of wares. The United States of America are very the same. They have all the other side of the crisis: they are recovering. Joseph Stiglitz published a month ago a calculation: he pointed out that, in the *recovery* of 2009-2010, the top 1% of US income earners captured 93% of the income growth. 93%. All the rest of the American nation is going deeper into death: people are losing their homes, losing their jobs, losing their prosperity. It is the tantamount of the economic crisis.

All right: that is the first thing I'm grateful for. The other question, which I would like to mention, is the new totalitarian use of the market. It is true. Because, what is totalitarianism? Totalitarianism is an aspiration to control every aspect of human life. That is exactly what the market is doing at the moment. Every aspect of the human life, every aspect of the human relationships is to be estimated, evaluated, and run according to the market. That is the new totalitarianism, which is, according to my view, a different stilted from the others. If others totalitarianisms were imposed,

this one has to do with oneself: we are all contributing to this totalitarianism voluntarily. We are reproducing it daily.

Recerca: Is it possible to recover the essence of the socialist thought, something useful and usable for the construction of a future society? Which is the sense of the left-wing politics?

Zygmunt Bauman: Well, you see, Schröder, the former chancellor of Germany, is famous and remembered to have said that there is no capitalist or socialist economies: there is only good economies or bad economies. I think that, until 1989, until the collapse of the Berlin Wall, reality or fiction, the imagination of the communist alternative set the agenda for capitalism, as well. Social-state *État-providence* had to be preserved because you had this communist power breezing to your neck and you had to provide some sort of insurance, pretention of equality and so on. Inequality was actually falling down, disappearing. It does change after 1989. The political agenda is no longer set by an alternative. That's one change. The other change is the slow dissipation of the working class. The working class today is going through the same process which the agriculture workers went through in the nineteenth century. They started essentially from being 90% of the population; they ended up being 9%. Exactly the same is happening now with the working class. So the traditional basis, the natural constituency of social democrats doesn't exist or is disappearing fast. It does exist, but not in our part of the world. Not in Western Europe, not in the United States of America. What is the place for the left under these circumstances? What is the identity of the left? It is not simply: "what the right wants to do, we will do it better". It is something very different. I believe, I suggest, it is just an idea, that there are two things, two principles, which define the difference, the separate identity of the left, whatever the circumstances, whatever the change of the social conditions in which the left take part. One is the principle of the communal insurance against individually super-misfortune. Community whatever is the community, whether it is a planetary community, whether it is an industrial community, whether it is a local community is responsible for providing assistance to each member of it. That is one principle; a principle shan't be denied by neoliberal development. According to Ulrich Beck, he is a very clever man and a very successful master, who has very well-aimed formulations, said that we are now all expected to find individual solutions to socially produced problems. So we have to deal with the dominant ideology, with our own individual resources, and limited talent, and limited cleverness, we individually have to find the solutions of the socially produced problems. Which in practice means that we are no longer concerned with a good society, we are concerned, everyone of us, with cutting for ourselves a little place in the dreadful world. The second principle is the principle that the quality of society, like the quality of the rich, is not to be measured by the average extremes of the pillars, but by the extremes of the weakest pillars. You can-

not measure the caring capacity of the rich by finding the average extreme of the pillars. The weakest pillar in size —the same applies to society— the weakest part, will measure the quality of society, and in the same way, the quality of life will be measured by the weakest part.

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